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Composing Postcolonial Geographies: Postconstructivism, Political Ontology, and Critique after
Indigeneity

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Abstract

This paper analyses recent calls for postcolonial critique and progressive politics to heed external, non-human imperatives. In particular, it focuses on recent work that addresses the demands of the Anthropocene and 'planetary' to question how such approaches foreground epistemology critique. By revealing inner tensions and performative contradictions within these accounts, the paper argues for overcoming the reticence to address ontological difference via a turn to postconstructivist ecology. The argument extends somewhat tentative turns to materiality in some postcolonial theory to suggest that postcolonial epistemologies need, increasingly, to attend to collective ontologies of immanence, and so to 're-naturalise' critique. Contemporary theoretical developments in human geography are progressively engaged with the questions and politics of material immanence and nicely placed to compose such re-naturalized geographies. The paper develops its claims through examples of indigeneity and ontologies of immanence in Amazonia.

Keywords: postcolonial, postconstructivism, ontology, indigeneity, composition, critique

I. Introduction

Just over a decade ago, an influential postcolonial call to provincialize knowledge production was felt across numerous disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The appeal to decentre the implicit presence of Europe as a silent but privileged referent in contemporary knowledge production (Chakrabarty, 2000) was explicitly engaged by geographers in a special issue and antecedent to the present issue of *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* (Robinson, 2003; Sidaway, Bunnell & Yeoh, 2003). These interventions have since become formative geographical research trajectories. Robinson (2003) contextualized Chakrabarty's moral imperative for urban and development geographies in an appeal for 'ordinary cities'. McEwan (2003) called for re-materialised critiques of economic inequality and transnational exploitation. And, Sparke (2003) sought to re-energise critiques of the conjunction between late modern war and the proliferating enclosures of neo-liberalism. These trajectories and their many interlocutions since continue to produce important geographical responses to the destructive logics that make up our colonial and postcolonial present.

But, has the call to provincialize postcolonial geographies been enough? A decade after the appeal to challenge Europe as the silent referent, significant questions are being asked of postcolonialism generally, no less postcolonial geographies. Have efforts to counter the Eurocentric character of knowledge production transformed scholarship in more generous and critical ways? Has postcolonial criticism actually succeeded in realizing a reflexive decolonization of knowledge production? If not, why not? What, if anything, is missing?

These questions are pressing for two reasons. First, the postcolonial genre is under increasing pressure to account for its perceived waning and continued relevance. From 'the end of postcolonial theory?' (Agnani, Coronil, Desai et al., 2007), to the possibility of

continuing the conversation about postcolonial knowledge (Chakrabarty, 2011), to its whither and whence? (Stam and Shohat, 2012), to whether there is anything left in it? (Parry, 2012), even to sifting through its debris to ask after its remains (Quayson, 2012; Young, 2012), numerous questions from a variety of disciplines evidence a considerable climate of scrutiny for postcolonial analysis. The tenor of these queries takes several forms. The more influential may be distinguished between those that argue for a renewed materialist commitment to literature to register and render the world 'on the basis of a transcendental critique' (Lazarus, 2011: 35; Parry, 2012), and those that seek to address postcolonialism's limits through ecological and non-human demands (Chakrabarty, 2009; 2012; DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011; Huggan, 2009; Plumwood, 2002; Rose, 2012; Spivak, 2003; 2006; 2011; 2012; Tsing, 2012). While both critical approaches extend and possibly reinvigorate postcolonialism's responses to the demands of 'global contemporaneity' (Spivak, 2012; 2), the present argument concentrates on the latter 'planetary' or ecological critiques. As such, my focus draws out a pressing limit to provincializing postcolonial demands, one that also exposes how materialist assertions that depend on renewing transcendental critique are far less radical or transformative than is often assumed. Doing so highlights the second reason why recent queries of postcolonial critique are pressing.

Since Chakrabarty's important call to provincialise Europe, the environment has increasingly dominated global socio-political concerns. Yet, while ideas of the social have begun to be radically rethought (ex. Latour, 2005), traditional postcolonial critiques of nations, identities, and territories have struggled to formulate conceptual grammars suitable to contemporary ecological demands. Ecology, it seems, presents both problems and alternatives for the postcolonial. As Chakrabarty himself notes, the Anthropocene creates 'a real problem for postcolonial studies' (2012: 12). Less a problem for postcolonial studies so much as its alternative, Spivak too has appealed for some time to a radical but 'mysterious' nonhuman

alterity (Spivak, 2012:341) that constitutes the ground for critical responsibility towards ‘the experience of an impossible planetarity’ (2012:346). One of the key challenges to postcolonial studies comes, then, from the need to re-think critical politics from a radical alterity co-implicate with human intuition and agency. Such ‘new imperatives’ (Spivak, 2012: 350) require rethinking the limits and possibility of postcolonial and political questions: Chakrabarty appeals for ‘ontological and non-ontological modes of existence’ (2012:13); Spivak invokes aesthetic ‘*teleopoesis*’ (2003:97). In either case, the more-than-human imperative is framed as either productive of inescapable ‘incommensurable scales’ (Chakrabarty, 2012: 1) or an aporetic ‘ground’ (Spivak, 2012: 346). Both highlight an incommensurable ‘double-bind’ (Spivak 2012).

I argue, however, that the stark choice reveals some assumed axiomatic limits postcolonial geographies should well begin to question. As the following will show, attempts to recast postcolonial conceptual grammars for the non-human through an emphasis on critical epistemology unwittingly reiterate Eurocentric ontologies about nature-culture distinctions. Indeed, Spivak’s planetary attempt to frame the re-education of epistemic habits, and Chakrabarty’s diagnosis of an incommensurably disjunctive politics depend on an implicit Eurocentric and colonialist division between nature and culture. In short, they do not ‘provincialise’ as they should due to unrecognized ontological commitments; they are not nearly radical enough.

In place of the somewhat tired rehearsals of representational limitation, I argue that we need to radicalise the provincialising call. Postcolonial critique is too often assumed to be doomed to navigate ever more nuanced epistemic protocols through reflexivity, aporia, agonism, and impossible alterity. Rather than never actually succeed in overcoming critical limits, I argue we need to recognise that that underneath postcolonialism’s commitment to critique is a still more fundamental euro-modernist privileging of the nature and culture

distinction. So, in place of a concern to re-habituate the ethical through ‘attending to the systematic task of epistemological engagement’ (Spivak, 2012: 9), I suggest that postcolonialism needs to address how addressing a more radical ground might advance postcolonial geographies attendant to the more-than-human. Radical grounds can be theorised through postconstructivist geographies of immanence.

Postconstructivist ecological approaches (for ex. Blaser, 2010; Braun & Whatmore 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Escobar 2010; Ingold, 2010), although diverse and internally contested, distinguish themselves from orthodox textualist postcolonialisms via a commitment to material immanence. Postconstructivism argues for a ‘topological sensitivity’ (Shields, 2012: 55) to the experience of social life as a relational ontology of materials, processes, and ideas. Sociality, thereby, is an implicate enfolding of the totality of relations for which, in phenomenal analysis and focus, it becomes a complex, momentary outcome (Ingold, 2008: 80). Thinking then is a distributed processual effect immanent in the entire system of environment relations within which human beings and their emergent concerns are necessarily entangled (Ingold, 2008: 79). Postconstructivists seek to collapse epistemology-ontology distinctions such that the familiar tropes of transcendental critique (i.e. delineated conditions for possibility) give way to accounts of ‘experiment and artifice’ (Mbembe and Nutall, 2004: 349) and inventive composition (Lury and Wakeford, 2012). Postconstructivism invokes forms of thinking that do not simply reflect upon, and police, various phenomenal identities already constituted, as though their natures are unaffected in the act of analysis. Rather, it refers to the compositional effort to extract from a careful attention to the sensible, singular points at which the constitution of a phenomenon is decidable and can become otherwise. Fundamentally, immanence refers to the fact that thinking, knowledge claims, co-constitutive responsibility, and political intervention are processes of creation rather than ideology critique, discovery, or prescription (de Bestegui, 2010: 6-7).

The following paper offers a challenging bridge between two sometimes disparate disciplinary discourses, postcolonial studies and their attendant critical geographies, and postconstructivist materialist ontologies. It does so in the effort to identify the elective affinities between demands placed on how the postcolonial as counter-ethic is currently being re-imagined, and important new materialist and post-humanist currents shaping contemporary geographical and political analysis. The object is not to edify one approach over all others, but to place two ultimately commensurate bodies of thought in productive conversation. After characterizing the particular arguments invoked to question the current limits postcolonial thinking must stretch to accommodate, the paper proceeds to describe how recent theoretical and empirical efforts to engage political ontologies of creation, composition, and experimentation (Latour 2010) can speak productively to postcolonial geographies. Examples are drawn from anthropologies of Amerindian ontology and perspectivism, and from Amazonian linguistics. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on the productive capacity of indigeneity as a fruitful discursive register for creative ontologies to write back to colonising assumptions in diverse and pluralising ways.

II. Chakrabarty's Anthropocenic Demand: Disjunctive and Impossible

Chakrabarty has recently argued that postcolonial criticism, indeed, 'all progressive political thought' (2012:15), must come to terms with the profound change the scalar implication of the human as geological force invokes. He writes, 'the challenges for the postcolonial scholar...come from two figures of the human simultaneously: the human-human and the nonhuman-human' (2012:11). Specifically, this is 'the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once' (2012:1). Anthropogenic climate change and generalized ecological destruction presents a 'real problem' (2012: 12) for

postcolonial studies, which, he claims, 'need[s] to stretch to adjust itself to the reality of global warming' (2012:1).

The problem, Chakrabarty suggests, is that in attempting to think the human, progressive politics faces a disjunctive incommensurability (2012:2). On the one hand, as a form of critical, deconstructive politics, postcolonial analysis is very good at analyzing and critiquing the terms of colonialism and globalisation. It is very good at debunking claims about how the world of modernity is supposedly indubitably registered and rendered. The supposition of, for instance, globalization as homogeneity is instead questioned by raising the necessary and ideologically occluded features of 'anthropological difference' that make up the innumerable experiences of being human. On the other hand, this same critical perspective is today charged, as never before, with the need to account for the human as a collective, anthropogenic agent whose force is *Anthropocenic*, i.e. geological. This, he says, creates a disjunctive problem for thinking the human. Chakrabarty writes,

These views of the human do not supersede one another. One cannot put them along a continuum of progress. No one view is rendered invalid by the presence of the others. They are simply disjunctive. Any effort to contemplate the human condition today—after colonialism, globalization, and global warming—on political and ethical registers encounters the necessity of thinking disjunctively about the human, through moves that in their simultaneity appear contradictory (2012:2).

He continues to what he sees as the nub of the problem for contemporary postcolonial attempts to think the human: we are required at once to think difference and totality. 'The science of anthropogenic global warming has doubled the figure of the human—you have to think of the two figures of the human simultaneously: the human-human and the non-human-human. And that is where some challenges lie for the postcolonial scholar' (2012: 11).

In setting up a response to this perceived problem, though, he precludes the very conditions necessary for thinking the human otherwise. These limitations take two forms. First,

he argues that 'our thinking about ourselves now stretches our capacity for interpretive understanding' (2012:13). This claim betrays a fundamental division for Chakrabarty between word and world. Interpretation must stretch to accommodate itself to a world to which it also must, even in a weak sense, be adequate or truthful. Critique is required, under this framework (as indeed under the ostensibly materialist frameworks proposed by Lazarus) to attune itself to revealing and mobilising a privileged position on a world beyond appearances. This figuration would be able to mediate, in light of its ostensibly privileged access, claims between difference, and, at the same time, the demands of a human generalisability. Chakrabarty thus appeals for 'non-ontological ways of thinking the human' (2012: 13) to bring about this needed interpretive stretching. Stretching is an epistemological, aesthetic, or political exercise, but it is one that reinforces phenomenal human agencies and accounts over the non-human.

In doing so, he critiques Latour's ontological appeal to an active political partnership of human and non-human agencies. Chakrabarty suggests in response to Latour that 'geo-physical force', such as planetary changes driven by an Anthropocenic agent, '...is neither subject nor *an* object, but...is pure, *non-ontological* agency' (2012: 13, emphases added), and therefore is problematical for Latour's account. Such a claim perhaps reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of Latour's position, and related contemporary postconstructivist appeals to immanence, political ontology, and new materialist turns to more-than-human agencies. Force, movement, dynamism, etc., are precisely the ontological real invoked by relationalist and post-humanist approaches. That's all there is for many postconstructivist positions: process, dynamism, plasticity, force, change, and movement (see for ex. Hawkins, 2010; Jackson, 2012; Massumi, 2002; Protevi, 2011). As Michael Halewood writes, 'it is the ongoing and eventful process of existence that is social, and it is within this that the subjects and objects of nature come to be (and are passed beyond)' (2005: 60). Process first, then the

immanent abstractions of subject and object, nature and culture, self and other. Objects are simply scalar experiences of different topological processes and events. Subjects and objects are topological facets of how we emerge from and look at an immanent, processual world. ‘Properties of materials are not fixed attributes of matter, but are processual and relational’ (Ingold, 2007: 1), or, as fellow anthropologist in postconstructivism, Viveiros de Castro, writes, ‘there is no stuff at the heart of matter, just form, that is, relation (2012: 153).

In Chakrabarty’s subject-object framing, the environment and matter is revealed as static, a passive substrate that needs to be exercised upon by a progressive, critical human will that needs to stretch itself to a demand always beyond it. Instead of developing a nuanced, relational account of human responsibility to a planetary ground that is always already imbricated in the material and mental constitution of the human, Chakrabarty *re-invokes* the very colonial metaphysics he attempts to question. Therein, he also ‘waives the opportunity “to conceptualize the dynamics of the socio-ecological totality as a global system, as an immense bundle of human and extra human relations and processes organized through the mode of production”’ (Niblett as quoted in Parry, 2012:346-7). For, it is precisely the capacity of systemic, imbricated understanding that we need to develop if we are to address the totality of relations that constitute the human in our postcolonial present.

To return, then, to the constitutive disjunction with which Chakrabarty’s argument began, there is a disjunction that contemporary politics must face *only* because, for him, the terms of the argument seem incapable of invoking an ontological worldview other than that bequeathed by a bifurcationist epistemology, wherein word and world are fundamentally dissociative. Yet, this is also the root we need to address if we are to re-think the human for our present. It is not the case that we must necessary think disjunctively about the politics of

the human. There are more choices about ways to think becoming, but they require 'imagining new imperatives that structure all of us as planetary human beings' (Spivak, 2012: 350).

The next section turns to Spivak's attempt to figure such new imperatives. It argues that although she presents a more nuanced account, and one that hints at material immanence, it too falls short of imagining radical imperatives due to its privileging of critical aporia.

II.ii Spivak: Impossible Planetarity

Spivak's argument has, for over a decade, gone some way to address the problematic Chakrabarty heralds for postcolonial studies. Unlike Chakrabarty, as noted, she sees 'planetarity', as she terms it, as 'the catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility' (2003:102). The attempt is to construct an alternative epistemic figuring of radical alterity to that of postcolonial studies, which limits itself to the problems of globalization, nationalism, and the proliferating colonial logics associated with metropolitan grids of capital exchange. Planetarity seeks to shift the episteme by reversing and displacing the global into the planetary (2003: 73). She writes:

The Earth is a paranational image that can substitute for international and can perhaps provide, today, a displaced site for the imagination of planetarity... Consequently, ... 'postcolonial studies,' will not suffice to name and contain an adequate analytic response to contemporary globalized capitalism (2003:95).

'An ethical experience of the impossible other', planetarity, Spivak argues, is needed to ground our ethical constitution towards an other, an ethico-epistemic orientation integral to what it means to be human (2003: 73). Planetarity, then, acts as an aporetic ethics. It opens us to an underived (i.e. non-human) embrace, and asks us to think ourselves subjects rather than global agents. Unlike the Anthropocenic worry that runs through Chakrabarty's recent work, the human is figured by the planet into a subject position that manifests a certain temporal

humility and tenuity, which itself is subjectified by the presence of an arche-fossil. Arche-fossil simply means 'a material indicating traces of 'ancestral' phenomena anterior even to the emergence of life' (Meillassoux, 2008:3). The figure of the planet *is* this trace for Spivak. For, 'to think ourselves as planetary is to remember that if we live a hundred years, even a devastated planet lives a billion, without us' (Spivak, 2008: 247). So, while the planet figures a ground before and after human life through which we must learn to represent ourselves, the basis of this ground remains impossible to decipher. Planetarity, as the geographer Joel Wainwright interprets Spivak, 'reflects our being responsible to our being incapable of reflecting ourselves' (2012: 70). Critique, then, is the aesthetic and epistemic exercise of perpetual self-examination and reflexion in the face of (im)possible non-human otherness.

The job of approaching the task of reflecting ourselves, however impossibly, falls, for Spivak, to aesthetics, specifically *teleopoesis*. Spivak draws explicitly from Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* to argue that *teleopoesis* rather than *istoria* is required to address the problem of impossible planetarity (2003: 97). Revealing for the present analysis, however, is the fact that *teleopoesis* is the imaginative act that remains undecided in its fundamental separation from the human. It is, she writes,

Imaginative making at a distance – *teleopoesis*...Thus when the bondsman affects and reverse-performs the lord by claiming ancestry, that is *teleopoesis*. ... This imaginative grafting is in the name of a new kind of 'perhaps', the possibilization of [an] impossible possible [which] must remain at one and the same time as undecideable – and therefore as decisive – as the future itself. ... We cannot decide it and therefore it remains decisive' (2000: 19).

The bondsman planet here usurps the supposed global master to evidence an arche-fossil trace as ancestry, and hence 'perhaps' imperative. Yet, the planet remains an aporetic in its imaginative grafting; it remains fundamentally other than the human, and across a divide that can only ever fall short, but which must be faced *as if* it could be overcome. These are end of the road geographies; interesting, attractive, productive, powerful even, but ultimately also

the reason the progressive politics of postcolonialism is questioning its future under the auspices of textual poststructuralism and agonal politics.

II.iii Spivak: Impossible Redux?

At least, this, so far, has been the picture presented in work predating the 2012 publication of *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. A subtle shift has taken place in Spivak's work, one which, though it does not signal a turn away from previous arguments, it also evidences a slight unease with the aporetic constitution that, try as it might, argues we cannot bridge the word and world gap, but must always return to in an inevitable interstices. Two observations bear this shift out. The first is an almost imperceptibly small change in language, a slippage even, between two characterizations of planetary belonging. The second is less subtle and reveals a curious turn to systems thinking and complexity theory through Gregory Bateson to argue for an aesthetic disruption of the habits that reinforce the proliferation of colonial logics.

First. In the 1999 and 2003 essays that explore planetarity proper, Spivak writes that planetarity refers to that ecological, arche-fossil other through which we can challenge the colonial masteries of the global. 'The globe is on our computers. No-one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, *on loan*' (2003: 72, emphasis added). Now, one might first think in response, 'No it isn't!' The planet's not another system to us. We're not inhabiting it on loan. Humans haven't arrived from outside the planet, taken up residence, and negotiated with it as visiting alien life. We are of it, emergent from it. Planetarity *is* us. Spivak's characterization of our planetary relationship is a strange one, but not foreign to an epistemology which emerges from a commitment to *aporia* and Kantian critique.

Spivak, though, is not consistent in this epistemic characterization. In the more recent publication of a similar essay in her 2012 volume, she presages our reasonable appeal. This very small shift signals something larger. She writes in the most recent version of the text: 'The globe is on our computers. It is the logo of the World Bank. No one lives there; and we think that we can aim to control globality. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, *indeed are it*' (2012: 338, emphasis added); two almost identical sentences are presented, one invoking material loan, the other invoking, very differently, ontological identity in 'another system'. '*We are planetarity*' in alterity. What can we make of this inconsistency?

Clues reside in the 'Introduction' to *An Aesthetic Education* where more substantial evidence bears out a tentative attempt to figure a relationship of planetary embodiment. In this essay, Spivak appeals for aesthetic education to 'short-circuit the unreflective and embodied habits' that limit examining the conditions for the possibility of our perilous contemporaneity (Spivak, 2012: 6). The planetary work of re-arranging desires, she argues, lies in an aesthetic training, whereby 'the habit of the ethical can only be worked at through attending to the systemic task of epistemological engagement' (2012:9). Two kinds of habit are set against one another. The first are the habits of globalization that 'oblige us to transcendentalize religion and nation' (2012: 10). The second are new imaginary habits whose remit is to 'keep up the work of displacing belief onto the terrain of the imagination, attempt to access the epistemic' (2012:10). Habit as a kind of embodied unthinking hegemony emerges as a significant trope for Spivak due to her turn to Gregory Bateson and Gramsci. Bateson provides her with a model of characterizing how colonial and capitalist logics embody themselves in and through unreflective human subjects. She quotes Bateson.

'[H]abits are comparatively "hard programmed"...The economy consists precisely in not re-examining or re-discovering the premises of habit every time

the habit is used. We may say that these habits are partly “unconscious”, or—if you please—a habit of not examining them is developed’ (Bateson, as quoted in Spivak, 2012: 6).

Gramsci provides a model for addressing how new imaginary and intellectual habits need to become equally embodied but as ‘active participants in practical life’ (2012: 10). Aesthetic education between habit and praxis then are the means to teach ‘the humanities in such a way that all subjects are “contaminated”’ (2012:9), and, therein a way to overcoming globalized habitual embodiment or ‘contamination’ with new forms of life, new forms of habit, and new forms of critical contamination.

Spivak’s language strains to capture ontological hybridity; at the same time, it seeks to preserve the (in)decisive aporetic tensions which render the planetary (un)thinkable. By insisting on aporetic planetarity as “ground”, Spivak reinforces a classic nature/culture distinction. Earth becomes the other against which culture tests its representational capacities, knowing that, in the ethical reflexions required of critique, they will always prove impossible to the task. Culture, and especially for the critic, an educated, aesthetic praxis, is the domain of reflexivity; nature, the thing always outside and beyond, but under conditions of planetarity, is the face, the call, of the non-human other. But its call is never heard.

Spivak’s own epistemic habit of clinging to aporetic grounds for ethics and politics precludes those capacities by which the planet may be seen and heard and smelled and felt and tasted and thought to speak. It can’t speak because the cultural subject, the aesthetic educator, is figured as the critical, aesthetic, and cultured speaking thing, through which the impossible planet does not speak. Earth, though present and subjectifying is mute. And, no amount of critical reflexivity will let it speak. In an early essay on the limits of reflexivity, Latour notes that reflexivity is a sort of aporia from which reflexivists “cannot escape except by indefinite navel gazing, dangerous solipsism, insanity, and probably death” (1988:155).

Hyperbolic as this may be, he continues when pressed later in an interview about such a comment, to explain that aporetic reflexivity is ‘...superficial; it does not give the nonhumans action, it only defines the rhetoric of humans *about* non-humans’ (Latour, 1993:116). Spivak’s position is surely this. If she wants to listen to the always already speaking more-than-human, then the aporia must be dissolved in a collapse of the nature-culture distinction that lies at the heart of her often powerfully reflexive, but ultimately bifurcationist, critique.

Ironically, the theorist she invokes to habitualize new aesthetic pedagogies, Gregory Bateson, did seek in his systems theory to collapse the divide between nature and culture, epistemology and ontology. Bateson’s notion of the three ecologies – environment, mind, and society – later taken up in different ways by Felix Guattari, attempts to narrate an imbricated figure of consubstantial and processual entanglement. Based in a systems theory of feedback and balance, the three ecologies together constitute a complex planetary whole with each system interdependent and co-constituting. The habits of mind Spivak invokes from Bateson were habits of embodied interaction of the whole, which is why Bateson was keen to puncture the epistemic pathologies which grounded them, *and* from which they and resisting habits emerged. It is thus something of a performative contradiction on the part of Spivak to write that on the one hand ‘we *are* planetarity’, and on the other, to preclude culture as the same thing as nature in the aporetic privilege. Bateson was a monist who saw mind (mind *qua* information process) and nature as a necessary unity; nature for Bateson simply *is* one vast interconnected, dynamic, open-ended cybernetic system, or what he calls mind (Bateson, 2002). Habit is simply a way of capturing, not unlike Bateson’s early 19th century predecessor, Felix Ravaissan, a material and affective continuity between mind and body, will and nature (see, Carlisle, 2010; Dewsbury, 2012; Ravaissan, 2008). As Bateson uses the term, habit collapses the nature-culture distinction into an episto-ontology. Spivak’s argument intimates in

this direction but pulls back to the aesthetic to fall short of invoking new imaginaries for planetary embodiment.

Impossibility and incommensurability. Both Spivak and Chakrabarty figure the planet as impossible, vexing, alternative other to postcolonial studies. However, in both cases, the radical potential of postcolonial studies to stretch itself to new ontological demands is, I argue, thwarted by postcolonialism's own habit of too often seeing its discursive limits in the ever more reflexive, de-naturalization of politics through ever more refined forms of critique. On the one hand, Chakrabarty misunderstands the terms, and thus the potential, of a political ontology, and re-introduces a colonial bifurcation of mind and nature. And, on the other, while Spivak articulates a more nuanced and complex aesthetic position, in calling for a systematic epistemic critique attentive to an aporetic ground of the 'perhaps', her own approach, alive to the linguistic and cultural turns she was so influential in bringing about, cleaves again to its habitual privileging of representational epistemologies which impossibly, decisively, fall short of the Earth.

So, what are we to do? Where to for postcolonial geographies of the present? In the next section, the paper turns briefly to approaches within and without geography that are seeking to articulate new imaginaries for planetary human being. Unlike the human impossibly figured as materially other than earth, these positions build beyond the aporetic to compose immanent accounts of material becoming, but accounts that are also alive to the potentialities and politics of proliferating different agencies and therefore imaginaries of alternative presents and futures.

III.i Postconstructivism and Political Ontology: Postcolonial Geographies

What's both interesting and problematic with Spivak's account traced above is the fact that, in her turn to embodied habit and a re-arranged systematic epistemology of desires,

the argument for aesthetic education as epistemic short-circuit attempts to engage the discursive *and* non-discursive aspects of human political enactment. The argument characterizes, but does not commit to also ways of enacting multiple political embodiments for the present. These embodiments try to be two things at once. They try to ‘think the human...as having both ontological and non-ontological modes of existence’ (Chakrabarty, 2012:14). But is this even possible?

‘Post-constructivist’ approaches would, I think, answer in the negative. But not because worries about ideas and knowledge are somehow illegitimate, but because the habitual modern premise that transcendentalizes the subject/object and word and world binaries reaffirms the binary rather than undoing it entirely. ‘Political ontology’ is a way around this conundrum. ‘Political ontology’, following Mario Blaser’s definition, refers both to the politics that shape particular worlds, and the material, and hence social, conflicts that ensue as different worlds interact, mingle, and sustain one another (2009: 877). What is distinctive about an approach that seeks to articulate political immanence is the recognition that ontologies are not epistemic or aesthetic reflexions that precede the constitution of ordinary and abstract practices. Rather they are shaped through the practices, processes, and material interactions that *are* existence, that *are* word and world (see, for instance, Latour, 1999). Ontologies perform themselves as worlds (Blaser, 2009: 877).

Given the performative contradictions in advancing postcolonial and progressive politics outlined above, we might have, with political ontology, an answer to what is missing in the contemporary effort to decolonise knowledge production. If we want to decolonize knowledge, we must provincialise not simply the Eurocentric bias that continues to manifest itself in knowledge production—including very much my own here. We must challenge not simply a univocal modernity with multiple modernities (for instance, Chatterjee, 2010; Grossberg, 2010), for this, as and Blaser (2009) reminds us, leaves the matrix of modernization

and the implicit privileging of Euro-modernity intact. We must go further than even the term 'provincialise' allows, tied as it is to the modernist and postcolonial habit of the metropolitan subject or nation state. We need to radicalise the provincialising call to recognize that underneath it is the still more fundamental euro-modernist privilege of nature and culture, subject and object, self and other. More silent still, the modern privilege subtends even the euro-centric geography. "Euro-modernity remains a powerful (and perhaps inescapable) "gravitational force" impinging on our diagnostics of the present conjuncture, and therefore of the potential futures we imagine' (Blaser, 2009: 880). To counterbalance this force, we need non-modern postcolonial geographies. Not just 'pre-capitalist' as Spivak has referred to them (2003: 101); the 'pre-' signifies here simply the gravitational pull of Euro-modernity. There is room for a realist postcolonial geography of the of a post-constructivist sort. Composing one, or rather, one amongst many will help us to enact fundamental realities, realities not commensurable under the conceptual habits that modern ontologies allow, but which exist as relational assemblages, wherein the bifurcation of cultural ontology *qua* culture, and natural ontology *qua* nature are not hierarchically related nor fundamentally and impossibly opposed.

Critical approaches like those described above leave the Nature/Culture distinction and its supporting subject/object, self and other binaries largely alone: Chakrabarty with his disjunctive problematic for figuring the human against a static other, worries about preserving subjects and object; Spivak, more nuanced, but with her aesthetic *teleopoesis*, clings to an aporetic ethics of impossible planetary figuring and so reinforces a nature-culture distinction. The consequence is that they translate the postcolonial problematic of difference against a background of Euro-modern culture. Ontological difference is converted into a problematic of letting other critical and cultural perspectives be heard, but heard against an assumed background of Nature (see also Blaser, 2009: 888-89). The problem then becomes one of hearing non-modern worlds, and thus ontologies, that do not assume a fundamental

bifurcation of nature and culture. Many, particularly aboriginal and indigenous ontologies are examples of this, and are far more relational than they are hierarchical. By foregoing the capacity to recognize their own immanent implication, these recent attempts to shift the tenor of postcolonial and progressive politics to a supposedly more radical footing actually repeat the modernist problematic they are attempting to overcome. They do not overcome the unquestioned assumption that nature and culture, word and world, *noumena* and phenomena remain a crucial fundament, and therefore constituent grammar, to their critique.

Several examples present themselves in evidencing approaches which foreground political ontologies of non-modern difference. Within the political ecology and anthropology literature, the more well known are the ethnographies of different Amazonian and Amerindian cultures by the French student of Levi-Strauss, Philippe Descola (1994; 1996; *forthcoming*) and the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1992; 1998; 2010; 2012). Both Descola and Viveiros de Castro are becoming increasingly influential outside of anthropology, in part, thanks to the influence of people like Latour, Serres, and Tim Ingold who are similarly oriented to postconstructivist thinking, and are sympathetic interlocutors with their work. Informed by their ethnological studies of the Achuar in the Western Amazon, and the Araweté who live on the Xingu River in the north of the Amazon Basin, both authors argue from positions that do not take the back-grounded nature of Euro-modern binaries for granted. Indeed, they actively disrupt them.

[N]ature is not something that exists everywhere and always; or to be more precise, that the radical separation so long established by the West between world of nature and the world of human beings does not have much meaning for other peoples who, for their part, confer the attributes of social life upon plants and animals,...and who could therefore not possibly expel them into an autonomous sphere upon which science and technology gradually come to impose their mathematical laws and control...In order for anyone to be close to nature, nature must exist; and it is only the moderns who have proved capable of conceiving its existence, a fact that probably renders our cosmology more enigmatic and less sympathetic than the cosmologies of all the cultures that have preceded us (Descola, 1996: 405-6).

Theirs is an analysis that reads cultural objects—language, stories, tools—as emergent hybrid processes within a non-cumulative, immanent, and un-oriented time. These ethnologists formulate a monistic anthropological, and especially on the part of Viveiros de Castro, a philosophical and political theory that attempts to move beyond nature and culture to argue that,

the world is composed of qualities...that emerge via the interaction between the subjects that perceive and act upon the world, and the specific physical properties of the world itself. This isn't a representation or a construction. It's an *actualization* of properties...' (Descola, 2009: 142, emphasis in original).

'Perspectival multinaturalism', the term given to their approach, (Viveiros de Castro, 2004) is, loosely, the attempt to characterize the fact that, whereas a Euro-modern ontology perceives culture differentiating itself through time against a background of primal nature, Amerindians conceive 'culture or the subject [as] the form of the universal, while nature or the object is the form of the particular'...'One culture, multiple natures—one epistemology, multiple ontologies. Perspectivism implies multinaturalism, for a perspective is not a representation. ... The body is the origin of perspectives' (2004: 466, 474-5). Theirs is a theory that attempts to come to terms with multiple natures that differentiate from a cosmologically primary culture, and the embodied differences of form afford the perspectives that actualise knowledge claims. Multi-natures 'embodied as assemblages of affects or ways of being that constitute *habitus*' perform and therein materialise, particular worldly becomings as compositional perspectives (2004: 475). Hence, 'for Amazonian peoples, the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity' (2004: 465). This extends also to the non-human.

Human and non-human persons have an integrally "cultural" view of their life sphere because they share the same kind of interiority, but the world that all these entities apprehend and use is different, for each employs distinct bodily equipment (Descola, 2006: 141).

What is important about this observation for the present argument is not whether it is true or not that animals share in different ways a human 'cosmology', but that the premises from which the claim is made is one that begins from a multi-faceted relational account of embodied becoming, and not from an assertion that nature is fundamentally other than culture. For as Descola and Viveiros de Castro are keen to point out, conceptions of nature within the Western Euro-centric tradition have themselves constitutive genealogies (Blaser, 2009: 886-87). This point is, of course, not unfamiliar to poststructuralist accounts of knowledge, but the ontological implications of performatively suspending the binary are taken seriously by these ethnological ontologies. For example, Viveiros de Castro characterizes the Kantian problematic that plagues Spivak's aporetic politics nicely, although for a different context. In doing so, he highlights the underlying reticence to immanence that precludes for planetarity the radical politics it supposes for itself.

Our constructionist epistemology can be summed up in the Saussurean (and very Kantian) formula, "the point of view creates the object." The subject, in other words, is the original, fixed condition whence the point of view emanates (the subject creates the point of view). Whereas Amerindian perspectival ontology proceeds as though *the point of view creates the subject*: whatever is activated or agented by the point of view will be the subject' (2004: 467, emphasis in original).

Multi-natural perspectivism and political ontology lie at the heart another, and quite separate, example pertaining to Amerindian ethnology, one that does not invoke, nor even reference Descola and Viveiros de Castro. This example is almost purely contained to the domain of linguistic anthropology and debates around grammar and culture. The controversial Amazonian and Amerindian linguist, Daniel Everett, has gained renown of late due to his anthropological and linguistic challenges to theories of universal grammar that continue to dominate contemporary linguistics (2005; 2012).

Everett, who has studied the language and culture of the Pirahã, a small group of isolated people living in the north western Amazon, argues that language is a product of culture, and a tool that emerges from the ontological and embodied contexts of peoples' lives.

This theory flies in the face of an almost universally accepted theory of human grammar, first put forward by the eminent linguist Noam Chomsky, regarding the innate cognitive structures of language bearing subjects. Chomsky's theory is often used to distinguish between the complexities of language and society bearing subjects (humans), and those without language and society (non-humans). Everett's ethnographic and linguistic studies of the Pirahã reveal that, unusually, the language of this group of people does not fulfil the criteria ascribed by the universal grammar hypothesis for abstract thought and human complexity. But, on observation, they do have abstract thought and are deeply complex human beings, but simply manifest this complexity in different ontological ways. For example, their language does not use unique colour terms; numbers beyond a few; nor geographical directional terms; nor do they have detailed recourse to mythological stories or a sense of deep past or future. Most importantly, the linguistic debate has centred on the existence or not of linguistic recursion which is taken by innate grammars hypothesis as a criteria for abstract thought, and hence a claim about humanness. While it is beyond the scope of the present argument to analyze in detail the debate, what is important to note, is that, although unanalysed in the terms Descola and Viveiros de Castro frame them, Everett argues that language and thinking is a materialized function of embodied affordance. Our languages emerge as immanent and embodied tools, that is performative, creative enactments rather than representational simulacra, from the general ecology of relations that unfold as our lifeworlds.

[I]f culture can constrain grammar, then grammar is not prespecified in some instinct or language acquisition device [i.e. unyielding static nature], but instead is part of a communication system shaped by external forces, including information structure, the oral-aural channel, and culture (Everett, 2012: 288).

He uses the example of directional words to explain.

There are many groups in the world who, like the Pirahãs, do not use their bodies to orient themselves directionally, but, rather, use the world outside their body for this purpose. The Pirahãs would never say 'turn left' or 'turn right' but 'turn up river' or 'turn towards the jungle' or 'turn down river,' and so

on....Pirahãs do not, and *cannot*, tell someone to turn left; instead they use external geography (2012: 265-66).

What Everett is describing is a hybrid ontology of embodiment, wherein the linguistic, semiotic, and abstract capacities of culture and grammar are a function of an ontological agency distributed through an ecology of relations specific to the Pirahã. It is an account of knowledge formation wherein, quite unselfconsciously for Everett, the simple recognition of ontological rather than epistemic difference emerges from accepting the nature-culture collapse. It is a recognition that has profound implications for how we seek to know the world otherwise, not in the terms of Euro-modern or Eurocentric privilege, but in the terms of the different subjects themselves.

Indeed, Everett's account of linguistic ecological affordance is not unique. The anthropologist and feminist theorist, Vicky Kirby, has recently re-examined Derrida's textualism to argue much the same.

[W]e do not need to circumscribe the arena of production and reproduction by segregating what is properly cultural from what is then, and inevitably, deemed alien, primordial, and inarticulate. What I propose is not a simple reiteration of the sort of cultural constructionist arguments that remind us that what *appears* as Nature is better understood as the dissembling of Culture...Instead I suggest...why the strange condensations that confuse and collapse differences into the mirror-maze of an always already might better be described as facts of Nature (2011: 92-3).

If also somewhat less multi-naturalist than other of her colleagues, Descola and Viveiros de Castro in particular, Kirby does place firmly at the feet of moving past a textualist, constructivist, and poststructuralist questioning of the human, an immanent ontology of becoming.

[A]nthropomorphism's infinite differentiations/specificities are expressions of one phenomenon, one implicated spacetime-mattering. How we approach this phenomenon (which includes us), a phenomenon whose identifications entail constant morphogenesis, is to open the question of the human, and writing, as if for the first time (2011: 21).

How very different, radical, and indeed, perhaps even hopeful, for composing new conceptions of human being this call is, compared to the incommensurable disjunction facing Chakrabarty or the impossible imperative facing Spivak.

Indigenous questions, that is, questions of natural belonging and 'being-with' life emergent is the new question for 'progressive compositions of a common world' (Latour, 2004: 53); this includes progressive postcolonialisms, theoretical, geographical, and otherwise. Far from being the end of postcolonial theory (Agnani et al., 2007), it might actually mean the end of one kind, and a new beginning for a much older, more radical form. This is not at all to negate the many excellent indigenous scholarships already with significant influence (see for instance, Alfred, 2011; Alfred and Corntassel, 2005; Byrd, 2011; Larsen, 2006). It is to extend them by suggesting that, for postcolonialism, the crucial question of rethinking the human through attending to natural belonging needs to analyse itself in light of ontological commitments to material difference and hybridity that emerge from careful, creative, and decisive attention to the sensible.

IV. Conclusion

If 'indigeneity still troubles postcolonial theory' (Stam and Shohat, 2012: 384), it does so for the all the right reasons. Less worried to denaturalise problems of origins—although this is still a crucial component to critique—questions today are composed by postconstructivist approaches to indigeneity in the attempt to invoke conceptual means both ancient and, at the same time, radically new. Ancient *and* new: a simple definition of immanence. The questions being asked and the specific answers being composed are tackling tropes and habits of a constructivist postcolonial discourse running short on new ideas, if also unfortunately, not running short on proliferating colonial and imperial legacies against which to direct those ideas.

Ten years ago the challenge facing postcolonial geographies was laid down in the call to dislocate knowledge production away from a Eurocentric referent to provincialised locales. It was manifestly successful in many respects. The fact that we are still asking the question about the extent of its re-writing indicates something of delimiting horizons. Today, postcolonial studies, postcolonial theory, and postcolonial geographies are facing a different demand. It is one, in fact, which might not have been visible had the earlier provincialising call not been heard and tried. But, much has happened between then and now. Climate change is an undisputed Real that we can see and feel. Witness Australia's need for new temperature colours in its weather forecasts. New wars have opened up, and are in the process of closing down, unresolved, only to open up again on different fronts, and by many of the same colonial and resistant actors. Witness Mali and France, Afghanistan and the UK. Neo-liberal processes are re-consolidating and deepening in the face of new enclosures and new crises. Witness Greece and Spain. Witness new dams in the Amazon, or payments against oil extraction in Ecuador and Peru to save rainforests and peoples, or Chinese special economic zones in Southern Africa. Resource colonialisms continue unabated despite decades of promises otherwise. Witness Canada's First Nations hunger strikes and 'Idle No More'. The new demands are ones that ask us to reach deeper than provincialising allows to address our implicate becoming within an ever hybridizing pluriverse.

The form these take is as open as the question. Hopefully they will take a form quite different from the one presented here, theoretical and disciplinary rather than world focused as it is. Composing new postcolonial geographies attentive to the question of natural belonging and the radical immanence of human thought and becoming through dispersed relational ecologies *should* be an imaginative and creative exercise, as open to different ways of writing, thinking, representing, and doing as there are modes of becoming. One can't say what these should look like, as they will be as diverse as the composers in their composing. What becomes

important for a postcolonial geography here is the emphasis placed not on progressing or advancing critique. Composing and creation *as* critique, or rather composition as a particular re-use of critique—what Sharp calls a ‘re-naturalization of the politics of critique’ (2012)—is suggested as the way forward. After all, I’m arguing that we need to re-naturalize approaches to an immanent postcolonial politics rather than as Lazarus argues, seek alternatives and supersession ‘only on the basis of a transcendental critique’ (2011: 35).

To be sure, attending to natural belonging—i.e. indigeneity—and how we compose and therein understand material becoming might open conditions to previously unthought possibilities immanent within our pluriverse. If today’s concerns for postcolonial geographies are matters of concern for the commons, emerging social movements, biodiversity, material property rights, resource depletion, migration, cultural erasure, energy scarcity, equality, and the destructive imperatives of growth, then attending to them in radical ways, as indigenous and non-moderns have been composing for millennia, surely is one of our more important tasks for learning about, and so advancing, postcolonial geographies.

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